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AUTHOR Barasch, Frances K.
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ABSTRACT

After an Open Admissions (OA) policy was established at Baruch college in New York City, heavy emphasis was placed on remedial English. This emphasis was unfortunate for creative students since it reduced all writing courses to a "utilitarian," pre-college level. OA students also need to develop their perceptions, imaginations, and abilities to express themselves in complex ways. One strategy employed to teach these advanced writing skills united memory, imagination, and form. After reading and discussing personal narratives, students wrote chronological narratives based on their memories about their parents. Next, they wrote of their own past experiences. Finally, they united their earlier essays in short story form, having come to an awareness that a story is made of memory, imagination, and form. (SW)

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"A STRATEGY FOR OPEN ADMISSIONS: MEMORY, IMAGINATION, FORM,"

by

Frances K. Barasch

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In 1951, Dr. Wilder Penfield, a neurosurgeon at McGill University, produced substantial new evidence about the functioning of the human brain as it regards the memory. Dr. Penfield found strong indications that the brain works like a computer, that all conscious experiences in the past are recorded in memory cells and are capable of recall in the present. Under electrical stimulation, he discovered, recollection can be forced from the memory. This recollection is singular not mixed; and it is reproduced in detail. Even more significant is his finding that the feeling associated with the event which is recalled is "inextricably locked together in the brain so that one cannot be evoked without the other."[1]

For all teachers, new evidence concerning human memory has vital implications in educational theory and practice: the old arguments about rote learning, memorization, drills, and other reinforcements come to mind at once. But for English teachers, in particular, the scientific concept that all experience is potentially reproductive and that emotional association must emerge with the memory has an especially stirring effect. Most immediately, the concept suggests a new and relevant way of dealing with philosophical literature, of explaining Proust, Joyce, and Wordsworth, for example.

Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling," as he discussed it in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads (Second Edition, 1800),

[1]W. Penfield, "Memory Mechanism," AMA Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry, 67 (1952), 178-98; discussion by Thomas A. Harris, I'm OK You're OK (New York, 1969), p. 7.

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was derived not by electrical stimulation, of course, but from ordinary objects--a tree, a mountain, an old man. The feeling was "recollected in tranquillity" and ultimately recreated in his verse. Wordsworth's poetic theory has interesting parallels in the experience of non-creative people. The psychiatrist Thomas Harris, author of I'm OK--You're OK, tells of a patient who "upon smelling the odor of lime and sulphur . . . was aware of a glorious carefree feeling of joy." The patient so stimulated recalled that this was "the kind of spray that had been used in the early spring in his father's apple orchard and, for the patient as a little boy, this smell was synchronous with . . . all the joys experienced by a little boy emancipated to the outdoors after the long winter."[2] One is reminded of Wordsworth's coming out after a storm:

> All things that love the sun are out of doors;
> The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;
> The grass is bright with raindrops;--on the moors
> The hare is running races in her mirth.
> Resolution and Independence, ll. 1-4

Students have the same ability to recall in detail both an event and the feeling associated with it, and this ability is a tool which the teacher can take advantage of when discussing literature. The composition teacher, faced with a group which has both an exciting variety of experiences and a deep reluctance to express them, can also make use of the discoveries of Penfield and Harris.

At Baruch College, a four-year unit of The City University of New York, the writing skills of students range from negligible to superior. In 1970, The City University instituted an Open Admissions policy, enrolling all high school graduates who sought admission, regardless of previous academic achievement. Seventy-two percent of the first enter-

[2]Harris, pp. 8-9

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ing class had reading levels below the twelfth grade; about half of these read below the ninth. Their writing abilities reflected levels similar to those obtained in their reading scores. During the first three years of OA, heavy emphasis was placed on remedial English, and many students achieved respectable writing skills in exposition, despite their continued disposition for making errors in spelling, possessive case, and punctuation.

During these years, however, little or no attention was paid to Advanced Composition, a traditional, non-remedial college course, in which students who already have basic skills can learn more mature forms of expression and can experiment with creative modes. The emphasis on remediation, although necessary, has been unfortunate for creative students, for it has reduced all writing courses, to a "utilitarian," pre-college level and has caused us to forget the value of Advanced Composition, except that further remediation may take place there.

OA students, like students everywhere, need more than remedial and basic writing courses, so that they can develop their perceptions, their imaginations, and their ability to express themselves in complex ways. OA students reflect the entire ethnic distribution of our large city. Most are the first in their families to attend college. Many are first-generation Americans. Some are immigrants. On the whole, they are parochial people, not necessarily friendly or expansive. More generally they are private persons, intimidated by the cosmopolitan atmosphere at CUNY. They are skeptical of strangers and of the imaginative life. They are not inclined to speak in class. They communicate very little at home. Their writing is generally repressed

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and dull. After spending their entire childhoods in ethnic ghettoes and attending lower schools mainly with members of their own sects, many of these students require time to acclimate to very mixed groups. For the English teacher, aware that the problems of OA students are as varied as their backgrounds, special strategies are needed, not only to teach English skills and to prevent or alleviate private bitterness, but to help students develop broader minds and an appreciative sense of self.

My strategy for achieving advanced writing skills at Baruch College among students who associate English composition only with remediation is through Memory, Imagination, and Form. The strategy begins with fiction--reading and discussions of evocative personal narratives, and the examples are many. From Frank O'Connor's "My Oedipus Complex," for example we have:

> Father was in the army all through the war--the first war I mean--So, up to the age of five, I never saw much of him, and what I saw did not worry me. Sometimes I woke and there was a big figure in khaki peering down at me in the candlelight. Sometimes in the early morning, I heard the slamming of the front door and the clatter of nailed boots down the cobbles of the lane. . .[3]

Students were to write about their parents as O'Connor did. They were to activate their memories and set down what they could recall. But the results were surprisingly meager. The students seemed to know very little about their parents, and, of course, they could not recall what they had never consciously known. They were assigned, therefore, to conduct interviews with parents and report information that was not only factual but descriptive and reflective. The form was to be a

[3]The Stories of Frank O'Connor. New York, 1950.

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chronological narrative, with variations if possible. Here is an excerpt from a student paper:

"Mother"

> At the age of fifty-one, my mother is still quite alert but worries a lot. All her life she worked eagerly hoping that there would be a better chance for the family. You see, bringing up seven children was not an easy job to do, especially in a place like Canton, China, where food was scarce. More often than not, she only had the water in which the noodles were cooked as a meal. Having eggs for supper was considered a luxury, never mind about meat or poultry.
>
> My mother was a well organized person. Poverty only made her stronger to cope with reality. She made diapers and strings to tie pants out of worn clothes. She managed to keep all seven of her children in good shape. The only worthwhile thing my mother remembered was that, we were well behaved children. Hunger did not make us fight with each other for food.
>
> Looking back into her childhood one would never want to be born into that period. My mother was raised in Heunghar; a place where there were no playgrounds, no toilets, no gas nor electricity, no running water. Every morning, she would get up just before dawn to feed the chicken pigs, and water the vegetables. When my mother had to help out in the fields, like all other children in her village, she would pick up horse waste and cow waste along the roads in a bucket. Afterwards, the waste was placed on the field to make the soil richer. . . .

(Helen Moy, Baruch College)

The primary result of the interview assigned, as we analyzed "Mother" in class, was a well-organized, substantive narrative. It varied chronologically, starting in the present and flashing back in time. It imparted a personal history, and by developing descriptive details, it suggested feelings about an unfamiliar person, a distant place, and another time. It was not memory activated within the student, but memories activated by the student in another. The process

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was instructive. It showed how memory worked, and how it could work for them if they allowed it.

Another student, opting for complete variation in form, described his own experience as well as his interview. He had taped his conversation with his reluctant priest, edited the tape, interspersed narrative, and played back the following dialogue:

"Father"

"Father, may I ask you for a favor?"

The response was immediate. "Absolutely no!," the priest answered with his obvious Italian accent. . . .

"The favors you ask me usually cause trouble, isn't that true?"

I was thinking of how everytime I confront him, he puts up the same argument. . . .

"Father, I have to interview someone for an English assignment," I said.

Father replied, "Someone is not me, OK boy?"

"Why can't you be interviewed," I persisted.

Father responded, "My time is precious time and you have stolen enough of it already."

* * *

The next day I left home with a portable tape recorder . . . . Father was a few minutes late as usual. Wasting no time, Father and I went straight to work sorting the junk that would be packed up for charity.

I tried to start off casually by saying, "Father, what brought your attention to the priesthood?"

"What mean?" Father questioned. Why I wanted to become a priest? I like to become a priest. I like to serve God in my best way, OK, and this was the point, nothing else."

I had started him talking. Fishing for something to keep him going, I asked, "Well, what did your parents have to say about it?"

"My father died when I was seven years old. Don't put your feet over there, you'll make a mess. I was the biggest boy in the house, eight kids."

"Eight kids," I said with astonishment.

"Yes, eight kids, if my father didn't die, he had another eight. You know, I didn't have such a good time when I was young. I had to work like a donkey in the house."

There was a slight pause as father referred to our work for a second. "That's too big," he said, "put the 38's in the other box."

I thought he had lost his flow of memory. . . But without

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> coaxing, he continued, "I did my best. Later if I chose to marry, the girl would probably give me trouble. You have to work, work, work. The girl enjoys the kids. When you arrive home, you are only tired. . .So I said let the kids be born to someone else. OK, so I became a priest and I enjoy it. And it was really hard for me to become a priest . . .When I came home for a visit once my mother told me, "Remember boy, it's more good to be a living donkey than a dead doctor. This time you are not going back to the seminary.' I let my mother say what she wanted. But it looks like what my mother said is true anyway. I'm a living donkey and not a dead doctor."
>
> (Philip DiVetro, Baruch College)

There were secondary results to the interview as well. Students found themselves taking interest in stories others had to tell. In fact, they were less bored by another student's "Mother" or priest than by Frank O'Connor's "old man," but they also began to see that even authors like O'Connor, whom they did not know personally, were simply "other people" they might know or people who might be sitting in class.

The strategy had worked thus far. The next step was to move from the "other" to the "self." Again, literature supplied the examples for activating personal memory. From Proust:

> I raised to my lips a spoonful of tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body. . . .An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses. . . . Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? . . . And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little "madeleine" which on Sunday mornings. . . .my Aunt Leonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of real or lime-flower tea. . . .[4]

or from Ernest Gaines:

> I look at my mama and I love my mama. She wearing that black coat and that black hat and she looking sad. I love my mama and I want to put

[4] Remembrance of Things Past, Swann's Way. New York, 1928.

> my arm around her and tell her. But I'm no s'pose to do that. She say that's weakness and that's cry-baby stuff, and she don't want no cry-baby 'round her.[5]

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For the students who were to describe one scene from their own pasts, instructions were simply to remember without wondering why. They were to concentrate on the recollection, for memory would come vividly, in full detail, if Drs. Penfield and Harris were right. The feelings were to be of no concern, for they would emerge through character and language without separate effort. The form was to be a scene, a place with people and dialogue that we could see and we could hear.

One student, remarkably slow in producing her work, finally wrote:

> The big blue suitcase lay stretched open on the fluffy white bedspread. Mama was packing to leave. I hated to see her go.
>
> Why was it that she could never come and stay? Instead she was always coming and going. I stood alongside her watching her pack, wanting to say something to make her stay.
>
> "Ma, when you leaving?"
>
> "Tonight, Baby."
>
> "You gotta go ma?"
>
> "No doubt about it, Baby. Mama's got to get back to work. But don't worry because it won't be long before I'm home again. Maybe you'll come back with me then."
>
> "I don't wanna go to New York. People in New York are mean."
>
> "People in New York are OK. Nothing's gonna happen to you; you can be sure."
>
> "No, forget it. I'll stay here wit grandma. Ma, can't you stay here wit us too and work here? It's a lotta work here to do."
>
> Mama had tried to explain it to me. But it did no good. I din't want to understand. All I wanted was for her to come home and stay. Didn't she love us like grandma; grandma never left us. She sure beat us plenty though.
>
> In a little while the cab would come and then drive Mama away. It would be too soon for me.
>
> (Barbara Ransome, Baruch College)

[5]"The Sky is Gray," in Bloodline. New York, 1968

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The emotional tension created by this piece when it was read aloud left little to be said about methods of expressing feeling through dialogue and description. For other students, there were numerous stages in the process of developing the single scene. Some papers lacked description, or dialogue, or vivid detail. When revisions were to be made, some students protested that their memories had failed. But more successful students explained that when their memories went dry, they simply "fudged" or invented the rest. It was not a question of cheating on the mind but of creating from the imagination.

A second scene was assigned, a duplicate of the first, except for the requirement that at least one character in the first scene would reappear in the second. The same student who had so arduously produced the preceding scene about parting from her mother was now prompt in submitting a longer vignette about her mother's arrival!'

> With one end of the jumprope tied to the plum tree in Kim's front yard, we had kicked aside our sandals and were jumping and singing as much as the sun would allow. The grass felt warm and soft beneath our feet. The heat had gotten the best of Brenda and now she was settled lazily in the nearest yard chair with her head buried in a book. No doubt she was trying to ignore our sing-song voices. What made it so bad was that she was doing a pretty good job of it.
>
> For spite we sang louder and faster. If it weren't for her, we would not have to use the tree as the third girl to turn the rope. We could even jump double dutch.
>
> On and on we sang, louder and faster. "Six, three, nine, the goose drank wine, the monkey chewed tobacco on the streetcar line. The line broke, the monkey got choked and they. ."
>
> ."Ouch" You idiot."
>
> Kim had stopped singing and turning so that the heavy rope we used lashed hard against my leg.
>
> "Girl, are you crazy?" I was asking. Kim

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had placed her hand over her eyes to shield them from the sun and was peering down the road.

"Is that Shirley coming down the road? Shirley coming!" she shouted, her voice high and squeaky.

With hands on hips I let her know I wasn't going to stand for this teasing anymore.

"It ain't Ma, Kim Lane, and you stop your lying before I beat yp' yello' behind."

My back was to the road and I didn't intend to turn around. With anger rising in me, I slowly settled under the shade of a big oak attempting to make myself comfortable. My leg was still stinging. At the same time I felt the tears beginning to swell inside me. Not because my leg hurt but because I was hoping all the time that it was Ma.

Brenda had raised her head from the book when I threatened Kim. Now I heard her shouting about Kim's squeaky voice.

"Jeannie, it's Ma! She ain't telling no tale dis time."

(Barbara Ransome, Baruch College)

When the class had written two scenes connected by a single character and had analyzed methods by which they could achieve unity between the two, it was time to deal with the short story as a whole. The form of Joyce's "Araby" is a series of scenes, linked by the central theme of a boy in love, developed out of memories of the world as it was and out of experiences recollected with emotion.

We counted Joyce's scenes, studied the links, and analyzed the whole. The students had written almost as much about their parents and their own pasts. They could now add scenes and links to tie up the parts they had worked on all term, for they had come to understand that a story is made of memory, imagination, and form.

Taken together these three elements represent a new skill which transcends remedial writing and previous academic achievement in basic composition. This strategy for OA is to use the unrealized self and even the private bitterness, to unlock the memory, activate the imagination, and provide students with new forms for creative expression and advanced communication.